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ABSTRACT

Classroom research procedures to help teachers to investigate their own teaching behaviors are outlined, and the benefits of such research are discussed. For undertaking investigations of teaching behaviors and their consequences, teachers are first provided with background knowledge and experience in classroom observation. A variety of techniques are available for observing classroom interaction, and aids such as videotape recording and observation rooms with one-way mirrors are also recommended. A second principle taught is that teachers should decide on the areas of teaching they wish to investigate, using ideas generated from readings, seminars, and workshops, when appropriate. Teachers are also provided with a set of steps for conducting research and are encouraged to exchange their ideas, results, and interpretations with other teachers. Experience has shown that from classroom research, teachers gain both awareness of their teaching and its consequences, and confidence in their ability to control what happens in the classroom. (MSE)

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The Teacher as Investigator of Classroom Processes: Procedures and Benefits

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As it is defined for this colloquium, action research refers to teacher investigation of teaching, as a part of the process of gaining a new understanding of teaching (and possible improvement of teaching). Action research involves a cycle of self observation or reflection, identification of an aspect of classroom behavior to be investigated, and selection of procedures to investigate and interpret behavior.

In this presentation I outline procedures through which teachers can learn to investigate teaching behaviors and their consequences and point out how teachers seem to benefit from doing investigations of their teaching.

Procedures

1. Provide background knowledge and experience in observation

In order to teach teachers how to investigate their teaching, I begin by giving them information about observation, providing them with knowledge about observation systems, and giving them plenty of practice in doing descriptive nonjudgmental observation of their own and other teachers' teaching.

General overviews of observation and observation systems are provided by Allwright (1988) Long (1980) and Malamah-Thomas (1987), while there are others who provide observation systems with specific categories through which observation can be done. Allen, Frohlich and Spada (1983) provide an observation system called COLT (The Communication Orientation of Language Teaching); Fanselow (1977, 1978, 1987) provides a low inference category

system called FOCUS (Foci on Communication Used in Settings); Moskowitz (1971) and Wragg (1970) provide variations of Ned Flander's twenty year old Interaction Analysis; Ullmann and Geva (1982) provide a system called TALOS (Target Language Observation Scheme).

Although, if time permits, I provide teachers with an overview of and practice in using a variety of observation schemes, I prefer to concentrate on Fanselow's FOCUS for a number of reasons. First, Fanselow's approach to observation, as reflected in his writing, is not to look for a "best" way to teach, but to expand awareness, to see teaching differently. The aim of observation, as Fanselow (1988) points out, is also to construct and reconstruct teaching based on awareness gained from observation. In short, one reason I prefer Fanselow's system is because of the underlying approach which goes along with the system itself. FOCUS is also especially comprehensive, captures multiple aspects of communication in and outside of classrooms, is low inference, and affords teachers chances to consider teaching in any one category or across categories.

The major categories in FOCUS allow the teacher to identify the source and target of communication (teacher, student, group, book, map, movie, etc.), the pedagogical purpose of communication (structure, solicit, respond, react), the medium used to communicate content (linguistic, nonlinguistic, parlinguistic, silence), the manner in which mediums are used to communicate content (attend to, present, characterize, reproduce, relate,

set), and the areas of content that are communicated (study, life, procedure). Each of these major categories have minor categories, allowing for a very detailed description of classroom interaction. (See Appendix for categories and an example of coding).

While teachers are studying an observation system such as FOCUS I have them observe interaction in a number of different contexts. As a part of their process of learning to observe I request they visit each others' classes, confer before the class begins to decide on an area of teaching to be observed (i.e., which students act as sources of communication during small group work; how long the teacher waits after asking a question before asking the question again; what classroom space the teacher uses in the classroom; what kinds of tasks the teacher sets in her/his questions), and meet after the observation to talk and present written descriptions based on what was observed.

Another activity I have teachers get involved in is video tape viewing. Teachers view tapes of each others' classes, classes of teachers they don't know, and professionally made tapes. They select small segments of interaction, make short transcripts, code the interaction, and decide on what patterns of teaching are going on. They do this alone or in small groups.

When available, I also make use of an observation room. While a teacher teaches in a classroom behind a one-way mirror, other teachers observe, describe what is going on, and discuss alternative ways the same activity might be done.

As teachers get involved in these observation activities, I point out that they don't need to transcribe and code long segments of interaction to discover patterns and consequences of teaching behavior, a point McDermott, Gospodenoff and Aron (1978) make clear. I also point out when they are descriptive and when they make judgments about what they are observing (i.e., "Oh! I talk too much! That's terrible" as opposed to "In the three minutes I observed I talked 65%, the students talked 25%, and there was silence 10%"), and I show them that it is sometimes easier to transcribe, code interaction, and recognize patterns of teaching when they do it in small groups.

2. Let teachers decide on areas of teaching they want to investigate

One purpose of giving teachers experience with observation is to set the stage for them to investigate their teaching. For many teachers the process of observing, making and coding short transcriptions in FOCUS or another observation system, and picking out patterns of classroom interaction can provide new awareness of areas of teaching they want to investigate in more detail. When teachers are ready, the next step, then, is to let them consider areas of their teaching about which they want to learn more. Below is a list of some of the investigative questions teachers have generated:

1 What happens in the interaction when I put students in pairs? In small groups? What is the difference in the interaction from when I work with the class as a whole?

2 What are all the different ways I can give directions to introduce classroom activities? What are the consequences

of giving directions in each way?

3 How do I use classroom space? What different seating arrangements are possible? What happens in the interaction between the students in these different seating arrangements?

4 How much time do students stay on task? What goes on in the interaction when they are off task?

5 How can I make language comprehensible to the students? How many "confirmation checks" and "clarification checks" are there during a lesson? Who makes them?

6 What kinds of possible tasks can I give to students? During which tasks do students ask the most questions about the use of language? About personal issues? About procedures?

7 What kinds of topics are students willing and not willing to talk about? What happens in the interaction when I ask students to discuss a topic which is taboo in their native culture but appropriate in their target culture?

Experience in observing their own and others' classes possibly contributes to each teacher's decision to investigate a particular aspect of teaching. However, I have also found that some teachers also make use of knowledge they have from other sources. Some teachers want to reconstruct theoretical knowledge gained from readings, seminars, and workshops. For example, the teacher who wrote question five told me that she generated the question after reading Michael Long's (1981, 1987) articles in which he discusses the importance of "comprehensible input" to second language acquisition and how manipulation of discourse through such means as confirmation and clarification checks can possibly make content comprehensible to students without oversimplifying language.

Likewise, the teacher who asked question four told me that

after reading an article by Berliner (1981), in which he discusses the importance of time on task to academic achievement, she decided to look at the interaction going on in her class to see how much time the students actually were on task and what was going on when they were not on task. Use of formal research, then, can be useful to teachers, and as Long (1983) points out, should be encouraged.

3. Provide teachers with initial guidelines to follow when doing investigations

Although I have found that some teachers will end up creating their own approach to doing investigations once they begin, a set of guidelines affords teachers the chance to plug into a way to start. I provide teachers with the following guidelines (Gebhard, Gaitan and Oprandy, 1987):

1. Select an aspect of your teaching you would like to learn more about.
2. Video or audio tape classroom interaction which centers on those aspects of teaching you are investigating.
3. Transcribe the parts of the tape which are pertinent to your investigation.
4. Code the interaction using an observation system or through categories you have designed for the investigation.
5. Study the coding for patterns and consequences of behaviors.
6. Decide on a change in teaching behavior which you believe will break the pattern or change the consequences.
7. Implement the change while taping the classroom interaction and again transcribe, code, and study the the interaction for patterns and consequences.

8. Compare the consequences in the use of the old pattern with the new one.

4. Provide chances for teachers to process their investigations through other activities

I believe that investigations do not end at step eight or that by following the eight steps listed above is all that is needed to do a successful investigation. There is some evidence, especially from my own research (Gebhard 1985, 1986; Gebhard, Gaitan, and Oprandy 1987), that when teachers have the chance to process their investigative efforts through a variety of activities while doing an investigation of their teaching, awareness of how they teach and aspects of their teaching they have never thought about before can evolve. When teachers have the chance to explain what they are investigating in their classrooms to others, give periodic oral reports, write up their findings and interpretations of these findings in formal papers and informal journal entries, and participate in discussion about their own and others' teaching, at minimum, ideas are expressed and the possibility for seeing teaching differently becomes possible.

What do teachers gain from doing investigations?

During the past seven years I have collected a variety of resources (copies of teachers' investigative reports, audio tapes of conversations between teachers talking about teaching, teachers' journal entries) which have provided me with the means to consider what teachers gain from doing investigations of their

teaching. And, there is evidence that some teachers gain two main things, at least while they are focusing on their investigative projects: (1) an awareness of their teaching and its consequences and (2) knowledge about <u>how</u> to study classroom interaction. Both kinds of knowledge can be liberating, freeing some teachers to be able to make informed decisions about what and how to teach without jumping on the most popular "bandwagon" or simply following the prescriptions of those who believe they know the "best" way to teach.

In order to show how some teachers gain awareness, what follows are statements about how a few teachers were able to see teaching differently after doing several investigations of their teaching.

One teacher examined classroom interaction in an attempt to determine under what conditions students made their lengthiest spoken contributions in the classroom. She looked at the effects of asking open-ended questions and yes-no questions on the length of students' utterances, as well as how the content of her questions effected utterance length. In this second part she focused on "life-personal content" (content which relates to the student's personal life) and "life general content" (content which relates of everyone's lives). She wrote at the end of a ten page report:

> My tentative conclusion is that open-ended solicits by the teacher lead to lengthier student communications than do request by the teacher for precise information... I also found that when the teacher asks a yes-no question in which the response is "no", students will say more; they will add a reason or an

> explanation... This leads me to think that if the teacher wants students to speak more, she can ask questions which she predicts the response will be "no".

She continued:

> I don't feel that it is possible to draw any conclusions about the effect of the content of the teacher's questions from this study. However, the one fact that I am struck with is the amount of initiative that students will take when their interest is engaged. Life personal content seems to have an intrinsic interest for students, and seems to free them to speak more, as illustrated in transcripts 2 and 4. Life general content also leads to fairly long student communications, as in transcript 3. But students will take charge and change the content of the communication when their interest is engaged by the study of language, as in transcripts 1 and 5.

Another teacher, after reading a paper by Mary Budd Rowe (1986), wanted to know more about the effects of manipulating "wait time" (length of time she waited after asking a question before asking the same question to the same student or a different student) on the interaction in the classroom. She states:

> First of all, I found that changing the length of time I wait after asking a question is not easy. I found that when I thought I was waiting five seconds, I was really waiting less than two...It took several classes and much concentration to wait longer than two seconds...I discovered that the pattern of communication was consistent with what Mary Budd Rowe found. I waited about one second on the average, and as a result I made 95% of the solicits and 98% of the reactions...However, unlike Rowe's findings, when I was able to increase my wait time to five or more seconds, the pattern of communication did not change! Instead of students asking me and classmates questions and reacting more to language around them, they sat in silence, some moving uncomfortably in their chairs. ...This leads me to believe that there must be something else going on in the classroom interaction (or possibly with my relationship with the students) which inhibits students from asking questions and freely

> expressing themselves. This also suggests, as I have heard many times recently, that the relationship between teaching and learning is complex.

From these two examples, selected from many I have collected, it is possible to infer that teachers do indeed gain awareness of their teaching and its consequences. However, perhaps a more important discovery for teachers is in learning how to investigate their teaching, the process of doing an investigation itself. As one teacher wrote to me in a journal:

> At first I thought that your request was not fair. After all, it is enough just to prepare to teach, and I don't have much time to squander. I simply wanted you to tell me what you thought I should be doing with the students. But, I did what was asked. I observed other teachers and taped my own classes and did the requested investigations. After a month or so, though, I started to see the value in what I was doing, but more importantly, the more I got into the process of looking at what we were doing in the classroom, the more I understood about how to look at teaching. Now I feel like I have more control and I know how to discover more about what goes on in the classes I teach.

Conclusion

The ultimate goal of teaching teachers how to investigate teaching processes is to free them from a reliance on prescriptions about how they should teach to confidence in making their own decisions based on knowledge about the teaching learning process and awareness of what is going on in the classes they teach. Like most teaching, the process through which this goal can be achieved is complex. However, I believe it is possible to provide opportunities for teachers to realize not

only that this goal is worth working toward, but also how they might go about reaching it.

One way teachers can work toward this goal is to learn to observe classroom interaction, as well as learn to describe, analyze, and interpret classroom behavior. In this paper, I have presented some of the procedures I have used to provide teachers with opportunities to free themselves, to be investigators, as well as what some teachers have stated they have gained from learning to see their own teaching differently.

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